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SHORT PAPER ON PIRACY IN SOMALIA

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A. Pirate operations: motivation, local attitudes, distribution of rewards

1. While piracy off the coast of Somalia dates back several centuries, contemporary piracy differs substantially from earlier practices. In the 19th century, land-based Somalis occasionally plundered vessels which had already been shipwrecked off their shores and commonly killed any crew members who were 'infidels' (non-Muslims) in keeping with anti-Western sentiments of the time. Nowadays, in contrast, pirate raids are planned in advance and carried out well offshore, often with financial and intelligence support from abroad. The objectives are strictly financial: there is no evidence of religious or other ideological motivation behind the pirate attacks. And despite frequent threats to the lives of hostages if ransom demands are not met, no foreigners have been arbitrarily killed in the hundreds of reported incidents of Somali piracy over the past two decades.

2. Modern-day Somali piracy is facilitated by the ready availability of high-speed boat engines, modern weaponry, and communications technologies (including mobile banking) which are utilized everywhere in the Horn. The provision of such 'capital' equipment, as well as the laundering and sheltering of money collected as ransom, require networks of supply and finance which extend to Yemen, the Gulf States, and Kenya, i.e., well beyond the locales from which the local pirates operate. While most individual expeditions are still assembled and manned by local Somali actors who know and trust each other, those who undertake the raids on the high seas are generally not the planners nor the most highly compensated members of these complex

operations. Rather they are hired hands; if the 'mission' fails, they are out of luck following the principle 'no prey, no pay.'

3. At the same time, modern-day Somali piracy has become deeply embedded in the local politics and economies of Puntland and central Somalia. Pirates operate with the knowledge and complicity of regional political authorities and law-enforcement personnel in the seaside villages from which the ventures are launched. Piracy is most common and enjoys the greatest chance of success in locales where it is condoned if not encouraged by local power-brokers—clan elders, militia leaders, important businessmen, or government officials—who tacitly sanction the activities and who expect some share of the anticipated profits. Indeed, the allocation of 'rewards' (i.e., successful ransoms) from these activities follow established patterns of collective clan redistribution, in which those of higher status and who stake more of their assets to the operation receive a proportionately greater share of the gains..

4. In this regard, it should be noted that virtually all documented pirate attacks over the past ten years have been launched from coastal districts situated either in Puntland or in the territories of the various regional authorities who vie for control of central Somalia. Virtually no attacks have originated in the coastal districts under the jurisdiction of the Somaliland government, even though the latter are adjacent to the Gulf of Aden where the sea lanes are much closer to the Somali coast. This suggests that regional governments (like the one in Somaliland) have the capacity to curtail potential pirate operatives along their coasts if it is their policy to do so. In contrast, it is well-known that the Puntland administration has been reluctant to crack down on piracy operations from coastal havens like Hobyo, Xarardheere, and Garacad for fear of alienating the clans which inhabit those districts and hence of losing their political support. In other words, Puntland piracy continues with the tacit backing of authorities at all levels...and so local pirates there enjoy, if not universal approbation, at least a certain legitimacy and acceptability in the eyes of their local communities.

5. One factor which motivates local Somali communities to condone the practice of piracy by their kinsmen is the benefit they receive when ransoms are collected. Not only are pirates expected to pay *qaaraan* (a traditional form of charity for the needy members of the clan); but

successful pirates typically invest their earnings in improved housing, imported vehicles, satellite dishes, large weddings, etc. for themselves and members of their extended families. This gives them status in their local communities. Journalists who have managed to interview pirate operatives and their relatives note the boom in newly-constructed houses, hotels, and shops in small towns throughout the districts where pirates operate. While many of the larger underwriters of piracy clearly shelter their earnings in real estate or commercial investments in Kenya or the Gulf, there has been a substantial ‘trickle-down’ effect throughout Puntland and central Somalia. Hard currency goes a long way in these districts, where locals perceive a noticeable improvement in the standard-of-living of those related to successful pirates.

B. Root Causes of Piracy

6. While piracy has a clear economic rationale and obvious material and status benefits for the individuals who participate or collude in it, the risks are high, particularly for those who put their lives rather than their financial backing on the line. The willingness to engage in such high-risk activities can largely be explained by the social, economic, and political conditions which have prevailed in Somalia since the collapse of the state in 1990. These include a) more than twenty years of major population displacements, resettlement, and recurrent violence against civilians throughout the region; 2) two generations of youth who have grown up without opportunities for formal education and productive employment; 3) a decline of livelihoods in traditional occupations like fishing and animal husbandry due partly to degradation of maritime and rangeland resources , and 4) a growing and highly visible disparity in wealth and standard of living between Somalis with access to income from relatives or business connections overseas on the one hand, and those forced to rely solely on family members and resources within the country on the other

7. The fall of Somalia’s central government in 1990 and the repeated failure of successive transitional governments to reestablish a national army, police force, or judicial system have resulted in the devolution of governance to a series of local and regional authorities. The latter have become responsible for whatever ‘law and order’ exists in the country. Clan-based militias, private security forces hired by businessmen and local politicians, and in some districts armed

Islamist groups provide varying degrees of protection to local citizens in exchange for their support and loyalty. To pay these assorted security forces, local and regional authorities frequently collude in extortion rackets, kidnapping, human trafficking, and piracy by clansmen under their jurisdiction. These widespread practices generate revenue and enable the leaders to keep tenuous control over their followers. Young Somalis with few options for earning a 'normal' living are readily susceptible to recruitment into these illicit activities to support themselves and their families.

8. The collapse of the Somali state also brought an end to public education, health and social services in the country. All formal schooling in Somalia nowadays takes place in privately-operated schools (both Islamic and secular). Young men and women without the means to pay for in-country private schooling or to go abroad for education are virtually unemployable in Somalia where even secondary-school graduates have extremely few opportunities for legitimate gainful employment. Since 1990, health care services have similarly been privatized, and only the wealthy and well-connected can afford to send their relatives abroad for specialized medical treatment. In such circumstances, many Somalis have found the only way to feed and clothe themselves and their families is to enter into the service of a local militia leader, smuggler or trafficker, or to engage in one of the many extortion rackets which target vulnerable civilians.

9. In such chaotic circumstances, Somali youth without wealthy or well-placed relatives must learn to fend for themselves at an early age. Most do not even know their own ages: without functioning hospitals, courts, or civil administrations, there are no records of births or deaths, and orphans are fortunate if they can find relatives to take them in. Children or adolescents displaced from their home villages and resettled in camps or peri-urban slums come of age without guidance from their elders and without the socializing experience of learning how to responsibly manage clan resources like livestock and wells. Instead they must hustle for themselves, relying on the approval and support of peer groups and seeking status and self-worth from the material goods they can accumulate by licit or (more often) illicit means. Some Somali youths have joined militant Islamist movements like al-Shabaab which (with help from external funding sources) offer basic education, a sense of community, and opportunities for leadership in

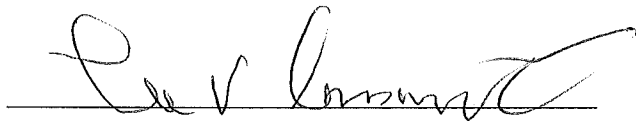
religious youth movements. Others turn to begging, petty crime, or—where the opportunity arises—piracy.

10. One explanation for the dramatic increase in off-shore piracy over the past decade has been the anger of traditional Somali fishermen over the invasion of their fishing grounds by foreign fleets and the reported dumping of toxic wastes in the waters off the coast. In response, the argument goes, Somali fishermen have taken up piracy to protect their maritime resources. While we must be careful not to exaggerate this ‘romantic’ rationale—after all, most pirate attacks are directed at cargo ships with high value goods rather than at foreign trawlers—there is little question that popular resentment over foreign fishing in Somali waters helps to legitimize piracy in the wider community. Moreover, as traditional maritime livelihoods have declined—the 2004 tsunami added to the woes of many coastal communities—the organizers of pirate expeditions have succeeded in recruiting former fishermen whose extensive knowledge of the shoals and currents off the Somali coast are crucial to the success of their operations.

11. Over the past twenty years, UN environmental surveys have also documented a marked deterioration of the country’s open central rangelands. This trend has been accelerated by unregulated brush cutting for charcoal production (one of the few sources of income for poor rural families) as well as by the privatization and large-scale enclosure of some of the best pasture and ground-water reserves by wealthy livestock entrepreneurs. The combination of vegetation loss in the open range and reduced access to dry-season reserves has made it more difficult for ordinary Somalis to earn a satisfactory living in traditional occupations associated with animal husbandry, and so has increased the attraction of ‘quick money’ from activities like piracy or kidnapping. Both trends have hit the central and north-central regions particularly hard, and these are precisely the regions which have incubated piracy operations.

12. In sum, long-term economic and environmental trends have marginalized large segments of the local Somali population and pushed them toward illicit, high-risk activities in order to survive. With some of the highest infant mortality, illiteracy, and unemployment rates in the world, and some of the lowest life expectancy and health provision rates, Somalia has become a fertile recruiting ground for ‘get rich quick’ enterprises like piracy. At the same time, pirate

activities are rare off the coasts of Somaliland in the north and along the littoral south of Mogadishu, where poverty and unemployment are equally widespread. In other words, poverty may drive recruits into piracy; but piracy flourishes only where local authorities sanction it or even collude with the perpetrators for a share of the spoils. This is the case in the Sanag, Bari, and Mudug regions of northeast and central Somalia, from whose coasts virtually all reported pirate attacks have been launched. In these regions, the disparities in living standards between the haves and have-nots and the absence of income-generating jobs for those not connected with the economic and political elites are most in evidence. Such conditions drive marginalized individuals who seek a share of the 'good life,' or merely a way to survive, into illicit activities like piracy, and into the service of those who finance, organize, and sanction those activities.



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26 January 2011

I certify that the foregoing is a true and correct statement, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

I have been a professor in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania since 1974 and am currently serving a second five-year term as Director of the African Studies Center at the same University. I received a Ph.D. in African History from the University of Wisconsin in 1973. I conducted extensive research in Somalia in 1971, 1977, and 1987, for a total of 19 months; and since 1990 have made periodic visits for shorter periods of time to Kenya, Djibouti, Somaliland, Eritrea, and Ethiopia (8 trips total). I also keep informed about the current situation through news services and postings on various internet sites, and by speaking regularly with colleagues who travel in the region and with Somalis in the U.S. who are in regular contact with their relatives back home.

A selected list of my publications, conference papers, and presentations to U.S. State Department seminars can be found on the attached c.v. Findings and statements from some of my research have been incorporated into the documents 'Somalia: Profile of Asylum Claims and Country Conditions' issued periodically by the U.S. Department of State.